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# A Preliminary Investigation of Empirically Based and Spiritually Based Marital Enrichment Programs

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### Abstract

Similarities and differences of two empirically based marital enrichment programs, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) and Couple Communication (CC), and two spiritually based marital enrichment programs, Couples' Temperament Workshop and Heirs Together were examined. Using published literature and observation, foundations, goals, content, and outcomes were considered. Programs contained similar goals and content, with core curriculum surrounding communication skills and conflict management. Although outcome information is unavailable upon the spiritually based programs, it is possible that these programs may be as effective as empirically based programs validated through research considering the similarities in core curriculum; however, research is needed to determine the influence of context.

### Keywords

Marital Enrichment, Religion, Spirituality, Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, Couple Communication, Couples' Temperament Workshop, Heirs Together

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## A Preliminary Investigation of Empirically Based and Spiritually Based Marital Enrichment Programs

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Research speaks to the efficacy of many empirically based marital enrichment programs (Butler & Wampler, 1999; Giblin, Sprenkle, & Sheehan, 1985; Hof & Miller, 1981; Miller & Sharrard, 1999; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999; Zimpher, 1988). More specifically, both Prevention and Relationship Enhancement (PREP) and Couple Communication (CC), the two empirically based programs examined in this investigation, were two of only four marital enrichment programs characterized as *efficacious* using the criteria established for Empirically Supported Treatments (ESTs): employing a randomized clinical trial design and replicating the findings (Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004). PREP has been linked to improved communication and problem-solving skills for couples (Stanley et al., 2001) and lower divorce rates and higher satisfaction levels (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2001; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). Furthermore, PREP is the only program with long-term outcomes after follow-up periods of twelve months (Halford, Markman, Stanley, & Kline, 2003). And according to Wampler's (1982) examination of studies on CC in her meta-analysis, all of the studies using high standards of research methodology found a positive impact of CC upon relationship satisfaction and communication.

Conversely, very little reliable data exists to assert the validity of spiritually based marital enrichment programs. For example, Jakubowski et al. (2004) conducted a comprehensive search for marital enrichment studies from 1970 to 2003. Only marital enrichment programs that had been empirically examined since 1990 were included in their review. Not surprisingly, none of the 13 programs they reviewed were spiritually based programs with the possible exception of one: Marriage Encounter (ME). Marriage Encounter might be considered spiritually based due to the fact that it is partly led by trained clergy; however, the topics covered in the program appear very similar to the topics covered in many others (communication, trust, acceptance), and there does not appear to be a significant emphasis on spirituality or religion as the foundation for the program. Regardless, ME was classified by Jakubowski et al. as *empirically untested*, which provides further evidence of the fact that spiritually based programs remain untested.

It is problematic that spiritually based marital enrichment programs have not been examined empirically since they are abundant amongst places of worship across the United States. Furthermore, as the aforementioned research shows, marital enrichment programs provide couples with the skills necessary to aid them in responding to challenging situations that arise in marriage, such as conflict. Considering the powerful influence spirituality may have in individuals' lives, the addition of spirituality as a foundation to a marital enrichment program may have an effect upon the power of the program in enhancing couples' marriages. For example, a study done by Karampatsos (2012) revealed a positive correlational relationship between spirituality and marital satisfaction. And in assessing spirituality /religiosity as a protective factor for married couples in adjusting to their first five years of marriage, Mika (2011) found significant relationships existed between spirituality/religiosity and dyadic cohesion for the females and between spirituality/religiosity and dyadic consensus for males; both were important factors in the dyadic adjustment of couples. Such studies convey that spirituality may play an important role in marital enrichment programs. As a starting point in this process, the similarities and differences of two empirically based and two spiritually based marital enrichment programs are considered. The foundations, goals, content, and outcomes of two empirically based programs, PREP and CC, and two spiritually based programs, Couples' Temperament Workshop and Heirs Together, are examined.

### **About the Author**

Having grown up in a strict conservative religious family, and having seen the powerful role that religion and spirituality played in the lives of the people around me, I have always been fascinated with religion and spirituality. This led me to explore theology as an undergraduate minor, to grapple with the issues surrounding religion raised by authors such as Flannery O'Connor while writing my thesis for my English MA, and to pursue an understanding of the relationship between spirituality and social skill in my dissertation work as a PhD student in Communication Studies. As a scholar in the field of Communication Studies, I have also explored the role of spirituality in health care, in particular, how spirituality may influence the communication patterns of medical professionals in treating their patients. Although I do not know any of the founders of the marital enrichment programs assessed in this paper on a personal or professional level, it was my interest in the impact of spirituality on our communication patterns and developing relationships that led me to pursue such a project. Through exploration of the spiritually based and empirically based marital enrichment programs in this case study and in particular, the noted power and influence of spiritual beliefs upon the leaders and participants of the spiritually based programs, it is my impression that spiritually based marital enrichment programs may be as effective; however, this needs to be validated with empirical testing.

### **Spirituality vs. Religion**

There is an abundance of literature surrounding the differences between spirituality and religion. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that when citing the research of others or when citing from the programs I analyzed, I used the terms used by the authors and leaders in the interest of accurate representation. When referring to the programs in general, I chose to use "spiritually based" because I perceive that to be the more encompassing "umbrella" term based on my own exploration of spirituality and religion.

## Methods

### Ethical Standards

This study was approved by the appropriate ethics committee at the University of Minnesota and has therefore been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down by the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments. Although the study does not contain patient data, Nancy and Ron Keller and Phil and Annie Winn gave their informed consent prior to observation and exploration of their marital enrichment programs.

### Data Collection and Analysis

First, four programs were chosen as a basis for study. The empirically based programs, PREP and CC, were chosen based upon their efficacy and reputation. The spiritually based programs were chosen due to their affiliation with large churches. Although spiritually based programs tend to be affiliated with a particular church only, there are some programs which by virtue of the size of the congregation with which they are used, are more well-known. The Couples' Temperament Workshop and Heirs Together are both programs in large churches. Furthermore, they are both Christian based, making them attractive to a large population in the United States.

The empirically based programs were assessed through a content analysis of published literature, which described and analyzed the programs (e.g., Miller & Sharrard, 1999; Stanley, Markman, & Blumberg, 1994; Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995). The literature was reviewed three times—once in an effort to understand the theoretical and/or empirical foundation of the program, another time to recognize the goals of the program, and a third time to clarify specific content included. Videotape and Power Point versions of PREP were also viewed three times for the same purpose. In order to understand the outcomes of the program, research that tested the program was reviewed (e.g., Jakubowski et al., 2004; Wampler, 1982).

The spiritually based programs were assessed through observation and analysis of published materials associated with the programs. The Couples' Temperament Workshop was observed in its entirety. Notes were taken during the program with a focus on gaining an understanding of the spiritual foundation (and any mentioned theoretical or empirical foundation), goals, and content of the program. Published materials associated with the program were also reviewed following the same process described above (reviewed three times) for any mention of foundation, goals, and content areas.

The 2-year Heirs Together program was examined, partly through observation and partly through text analysis (all Heirs Together lectures are printed in manuals). First, a couple of the sessions were observed to get a clearer picture of how the lectures were constructed and delivered and to understand the focus of the program. The remaining lectures were then reviewed with the same intention and using the same 3-step review process: to gain an understanding of foundation, goals, and content. In coding, the data were compared continuously to discover emerging themes and patterns found within the three selected filters (foundations, goals, and content) of the four programs examined. In interpreting the data, I compared theme frequencies and assessed relationships between different themes (Guest & MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

## **The Programs**

### **Foundation: Empirically Based Programs**

**Foundation of PREP.** PREP was developed by Howard Markman at Indiana University based upon his research on marital distress. He was later joined by other researchers: Frank Floyd, Scott Stanley, and Susan Blumberg (Stanley et al., 1999). PREP is grounded in both theory and research. Markman (1981) found communication quality before marriage to be one of the best predictors of future distress. PREP is thus grounded in research on communication begun in the 1970s (e.g., Gottman, Notarius, Gonso, & Markman, 1976; Guerney, 1977; Markman, 1981; Miller, 1971; Renick, Blumberg, & Markman, 1992; Wampler & Sprenkle, 1980), with the addition of concepts and techniques from more recent research bearing on such dimensions as conflict management, gender differences, commitment, religion, cognitions, fun and friendship (Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995). The theoretical underpinnings (cognitive-behavioral tradition of change) thus focus on ways of thinking (attitudes and expectations) and behaving (communication and conflict management), and this is carried out as a skills-oriented approach (Stanley et al., 1999).

**Foundation of CC.** Couple Communication was developed by Sherod Miller, Elam Nunnally, and Daniel Wackman, in their research work as graduate students at the University of Minnesota Family Study Center. CC is based upon research ideas on family development from Reuben Hill, communication and interactive processes from Virginia Satir, Don Jackson, and Paul Watzlawick, self-disclosure from Sidney Jourard, and styles of communication from William Hill (Miller & Sharrard, 1999). Theoretically, CC is highly grounded in the systems theory approach (Bertalanffy, 1950; Miller, 1978). Thus, CC is designed to “heighten a couple’s ability to enhance and enrich their functioning as a system” (Miller & Sharrard, 1999, p. 129).

### **Foundation: Spiritually Based Programs**

**Foundation of Couples’ Temperament Workshop.** The Couples’ Temperament Workshop was founded and led by a married couple, Nancy and Ron Keller. Nancy Keller is the Director of Marriage Ministry at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis, Minnesota; she has an MA in Pastoral Ministry and an MA in Counseling. Ron Keller is a nationally licensed Clinical Pastoral Counselor and a certified Temperament Therapist. He holds a Ph.D. in Christian Counseling Psychology and an MA in Theology from Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California.

Unlike the empirically based programs, the Couples’ Temperament Workshop is not grounded in research. However, it does have a theoretical foundation, which is aligned with significant work by Schutz (1958). The Couples’ Temperament Workshop is grounded in temperament theories, which discuss the importance of understanding the inner person through individual temperaments. According to such theories, each individual is born with a temperament, which does not change throughout life. Furthermore, every individual has temperament needs of varying degrees. Keller and Keller argue that most interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts are caused when an individual’s temperament needs are not met or when an individual attempts to meet his/her temperament needs in an unhealthy way. Individual temperaments are measured in this workshop using the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation Behavior (FIRO-B), developed by Schutz (1958). Temperament Theory applied by Arno and Arno (2008) in a spiritual context focuses on helping individuals understand their unique temperament, with goals of facilitating long term emotional and spiritual well-being.

Keller and Keller discuss using this therapy as a tool in aiding couples in understanding themselves and their partners better.

**Foundation of Heirs Together.** Heirs Together is a Christian based program founded and led by a married couple, Phil and Annie Winn, who developed the curriculum for the program in 1995. Phil's background is in business administration and foreign languages. He is currently the Marketing Director for CFAITH.com, a Christian Internet company. He has had experience as a pastor, church administrator, and church consultant. Annie's background is in nursing.

Heirs Together has not been researched either; however, like all of the other programs, there are strong foundational reasons underlying this approach. The curriculum of Heirs Together is based upon a book written by Pastor Mac Hammond (1998), entitled *Heirs Together, Solving the Mystery of a Satisfying Marriage*. Heirs Together also relies on Bible scripture for its curriculum. As Winn stated during a program session, "If I may use scripture to explain our marriage theory, 1 Peter 3:7 tells us that we are 'heirs together of the grace of life.' That is, husband and wife will experience harmony and satisfaction spiritually, mentally, and physically only through cooperatively yielded effort."

### **Theoretical Foundation of Spiritually Based Programs Based on Author Assessment**

Based on a review of both spiritually based programs, I would argue that Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder's (1982) Theory of Secondary Control is applicable in understanding them. Rothbaum et al. claim that there are three forms of secondary control (interpretive, predictive, and vicarious), which are significant in understanding how religion helps people cope with everyday problems and stresses. Scriptural passages were cited in both programs, revealing the belief by such programs that religion and/or spirituality will help couples with their problems. Furthermore, the implicit encouragement of interpretive control and vicarious control occurred throughout the Couples' Temperament workshop.

Interpretive control is the exercise of viewing a distressing situation in less troubling or in positive terms. This type of control was apparent in the consistent urging by the instructors for couples to understand, accept, and respect the differences that exist between them. This was clear in the workshop goals and was emphasized throughout the Couples' Temperament workshop, especially while couples viewed their temperament profiles in relationship to each other. Thus, leaders encouraged couples to construe their differences in a positive light, such that they may more easily cope with them.

Vicarious control was also apparent in the Couples' Temperament Workshop. Vicarious control reportedly occurs when people turn to God to vicariously become a support or substitute for their own actions. Vicarious control was encouraged in order that couples again, may more readily understand, accept, and respect their differences. For example, as couples were given their temperament profiles, they were asked to "let God guide you [them]."

Vicarious control was also apparent in the prescriptive approach to marital enrichment observed in Heirs Together. For example, in one of the sessions observed, Winn talked about how important it was for couples to attempt to understand scripture in an effort to grasp gender differences and communication patterns. Winn also encouraged couples to pray together and learn conflict management, money management, and parenting "the Bible way." Thus, Winn's interpretation of the Bible is used to prescribe healthy actions for couples. In terms of conflict resolution for example, Winn used scriptural passages to support the importance of setting boundaries for oneself in terms of one's responsibilities toward others. He cited from Galatians 6:2, "Carry each other's *burdens*, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" and then from Galatians 6:5, "For each one should carry his own *load*." He proceeded to analyze the Greek words for "burden," which focuses on excess, and "load," which focuses upon daily toil.

With this information, Winn interpreted for his audience: “We are responsible *to* others in their excessive burdens but *for* ourselves in our daily toils.” In this way, audience members are asked to refer to scripture and to rely upon their understanding of God for support in their actions. In other words, through their interpretation of the Bible, people learn vicarious control.

### **Comparison: Empirically Based vs Spiritually Based Program Foundations**

There appear to be some similarities across the backgrounds of the founders and leaders of both empirically based and spiritually based programs. In both cases, the founders and leaders are well-educated scholars with advanced degrees and a clear interest in forming programs that they perceive to be useful in helping married couples to engage in fulfilling relationships. Furthermore, the empirically based programs are grounded in a wealth of research and theory. While the spiritually based programs do not allude to research as their basis/foundation, the Couples’ Temperament Workshop is grounded in temperament theories, and Heirs Together articulates a strong foundation based on a book that is aligned with their spiritual goals.

### **Goals: Empirically Based Programs**

**Goals of PREP.** PREP’s main aim is to give couples the tools to deal effectively with the two things that can be most distressing in marriages—communication and conflict (Renick et al., 1992; Schoenfeld, 1996; Stanley et al., 1999). However, PREP also aims to aid couples in clarifying and evaluating their expectations of marriage and their core belief systems, understanding the importance of long-term commitment, and enhancing their friendships, social activities, and sexual experiences (Renick et al., 1992; Stanley et al., 1999; Sullivan & Goldschmidt, 2000).

**Goals of CC.** CC’s four goals are consistent with its base in systems theory. First, it aims to help couples increase their awareness of themselves, their partners, and their relationships, which taps into systems theory properties of individuation, interconnectedness, boundaries, and synergy. Next, the program attempts to teach skills for talking and listening together effectively, which accomplishes systems theory properties of differentiation and information processing. Furthermore, couples are asked to expand their options in terms of enriching their relationships, which aims at guiding couples toward adhering to the systems theory properties of self-maintaining, self-directing, self-monitoring, and self-repairing. Finally, the program attempts to help couples to increase satisfaction with the outcomes of issues and of the relationship, which focuses upon the properties of purpose and efficiency (Miller & Sharrard, 1999).

### **Goals: Spiritually Based Programs**

**Goals of Couples’ Temperament Workshop.** The goals of the Couples’ Temperament Workshop were stated on a handout given to session participants: to understand, accept, and respect oneself; to understand, accept, and respect one’s partner; to learn to accept different as different, not better or worse; to learn how to have and maintain a personal and couple relationship with Jesus Christ; to learn how to look at one’s spouse with the eyes of Christ; and to explore the core issues that cause conflict in one’s relationship. This focus upon awareness of self, partner, and relationship is very similar to the goals present in CC.

**Goals of Heirs Together.** The general goal of the Heirs Together Program is to provide married couples with Bible teaching, small group fellowship and prayer on the topic of marriage. On a micro-level, each of the four sessions has its own goals, aiming to assist couples



in the areas of: God's plan for marriage, financial management, parenting, building a marriage team, spiritual intimacy, conflict resolution, and sexual intimacy.

### **Comparison: Empirically Based vs Spiritually Based Program Goals**

Conflict resolution is mentioned as a goal in all four programs, and there is also a focus on enhancing communication in all four programs. Couple Communication (empirically based) and the Couples' Temperament Workshop (spiritually based) also have a very similar focus upon awareness of self, partner, and relationship.

### **Content: Empirically Based Programs**

**Content of PREP.** PREP is framed in terms of teaching couples skills to handle their conflicts effectively. In a twelve hour program, couples are first made aware of behaviors that are corrosive to their relationships: withdrawal, escalation, negative interpretations, and invalidation (Stanley, Markman, & Blumberg, 1994; Stanley et al., 1999). The hallmark of PREP is thus taught in order that couples may avoid such corrosive behaviors—the speaker-listener technique. The speaker-listener technique requires an object to be held by the speaker; this non-verbally conveys that the speaker has the floor. The speaker is also encouraged to keep statements brief, speak only for himself/herself, and periodically stop to let the listener paraphrase to insure clarity in communication (Stanley et al., 1994; Stanley et al., 1999). This technique helps to slow things down, avoiding escalation. Further, both partners talk, therefore cutting out the problem of withdrawal, and both talk in an uninterrupted manner, thus reducing invalidation (Stanley et al., 1994). In short, couples are encouraged to discuss their feelings in a constructive manner—not to solve the problem. The problem solving techniques are to be used only after the conflict has been fleshed out using the speaker-listener technique (Stanley et al., 1994).

Problem solving is another important segment of PREP. Couples are taught to frame their conflicts in terms of “problem discussion,” where they use the speaker-listener technique, and then “problem solution,” where they use specific steps to resolve a conflict: agenda setting, brainstorming, agreement and compromise, and follow-up (Stanley et al., 1994). Couples are also taught to separate events from issues; events trigger deeper issues in relationships, such as money, communication, relatives, religion, and jealousy (Stanley et al., 1994). Finally, couples are taught to be especially wary of hidden issues (real issues at stake in a relationship): power, caring, recognition, commitment, integrity, and acceptance (Stanley et al., 1994).

Aside from conflict management, communication, and problem-solving skills, other topics may be covered: clarification and sharing of beliefs and expectations, ways to keep fun alive in a relationship, ground rules to follow for a successful relationship, methods for maintaining friendship, sensual enhancement, and commitment (Sullivan & Goldschmidt, 2000). Sessions may also cover how spiritual values (honor, respect, intimacy, and forgiveness) impact relationships, however, these sessions are optional (Renick et al., 1992).

**Content of CC.** Couple Communication may be taught to an individual couple in six 50-minute sessions or to a small or large group of couples in four 2-hour sessions. Prior to training, couples are asked to sign a “maxi-contract,” insuring that both partners understand the goals and nature of the program and want to participate. This keeps attendance levels and commitment high (Miller & Sharrard, 1999).

The four sessions involve a focus on self, partner, conflict, and communication styles. In the first session, “Caring for Self,” couples are made aware of the fact that each has idiosyncrasies, which may at times cause conflict. Couples are introduced to the Awareness Wheel, which aids in practicing self-talk (to reflect upon self and to more clearly understand

topical, personal, and relational issues) and in learning six talking skills to aid in couple communication. Self-individuation is the true focus of the session. Thus, partners learn how to nurture their personal development by exercising self-awareness, understanding, and delineation (boundaries); validation and confidence; ownership and responsibility; assertion-agency; congruent disclosure; self-esteem; and choice and commitment. (Miller & Sharrard, 1999).

In the second session, “Caring for Your Partner,” partners learn to “differentiate and build other self-esteem” (Miller & Sharrard, 1999, p. 131). The Awareness Wheel is used in this case to view other-awareness. Couples learn five listening skills and practice the Listening Cycle, a skills strategy, which helps couples to acquire high quality other-information, particularly in stressful situations. The idea in this session is to help couples learn to follow rather than to lead, pursue understanding prior to agreement, heighten self-receptivity and responsiveness, communicate concern and validate the partner’s experience, and reduce resistance (Miller & Sharrard, 1999).

In the third session, “Resolving Conflicts: Mapping Issues,” partners learn to collaborate in order to resolve conflicts (Miller & Sharrard, 1999). This session brings together the self from session 1 and the other from session 2, since collaboration involves honoring both partners’ concerns and desires. Couples learn the differences between functional and dysfunctional ways of handling conflict. They identify their own patterns of conflict resolution, and they learn the eight-step “mapping-an-issue” collaborative process based on talking and listening skills taught in the first two sessions: identify and define the issue, create a mini-contract committing to work through the issue, understand the issue, identify wants, generate options, choose actions, test the action plan, and evaluate the outcome (Miller & Sharrard, 1999). The process is a reflection of systems theory in that couples are taught to work collaboratively to “create systemic outcomes that neither partner would probably have generated individually” (Miller & Sharrard, 1999, p. 133).

In the final session, “Choosing Communication Styles,” couple members identify their own communication styles, integrate talking and listening skills learned in previous sessions, and practice styles 3 (“search talk” and “explorative listening”) and 4 (“straight talk” and “attentive listening”) in the discussion of a real issue. This session is based on research by Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), which asserts that “genuine dialogue is the necessary context within which mature individuation must occur” (as referenced in Miller & Sharrard, 1999, p. 134). Miller and Sharrard (1999) claim that “search talk” and “straight talk” strategies facilitate such genuine dialogue, leading to collaboration rather than control.

### **Content: Spiritually Based Programs**

**Content of Couples’ Temperament Workshop.** The Couples’ Temperament Workshop is a 6-hour program. Similar to PREP and CC, the focus of this program is upon handling conflict effectively. Couples are educated about the underlying reasons for conflict: differences in temperament, unmet needs, differences in families, lack of preparation for the disillusionment phase of marriage, and the notion of marrying an “ideal” rather than a person. According to the Keller’s (2001), these conflicts can be handled more effectively when individuals and their partners understand their “core selves” or temperaments. Thus, couples are encouraged to understand, accept, and respect their temperament differences in order that they can meet the needs of their partners, accommodate for differences in temperament and families, understand their partners as persons and not as “ideals,” and together be prepared for the end of the “honeymoon phase” in the relationship.

A focus on the temperament profiles of the couples is key in this program. Prior to the session, couples had completed a 54-item temperament profile, which taps into three areas

taken from Schutz (1958): inclusion (e.g., “I join social groups,” “I try to participate in group activities.”), control (e.g., “I let other people decide what to do,” “I let other people control my actions.”), and affection (e.g., “I try to have close relationships with people,” “I like people to act cool and distant toward me.”). The profiles give each individual temperament labels (which may be temperament blends, consisting of more than one of the following) for each of the three dimensions: sanguine (optimistic, needs recognition), melancholy (creative, deep thinkers), phlegmatic (balanced, resists change), supine (responders, seek guidance), or choleric (angry, intelligent). Next, a quote from scripture is cited in support of each temperament, however such scriptures were not discussed. They were provided simply as reference point for the work, which may allow for enhanced discussion by the couples. Couples are then asked to communicate about their differences. Finally, session leaders give practical ideas in using the temperament differences to resolve conflict. For example, a format is given for problem-solving: schedule a specific date, time, and place in the next week to work on understanding and meeting partner’s needs; pray together; identify one important unmet temperament need for each partner; express feelings about unmet needs; list and read at least five ways to meet partner’s need without judgment or evaluation; choose options to which both agree; agree to implement options for one week; set up follow-up date for evaluation; celebrate any progress. This is similar to the aforementioned problem-discussion and problem-solving techniques proposed in PREP.

**Content of Heirs Together.** Heirs Together is a 2-year program, with four sessions, each running 8-10 weeks. In the end, couples meet 32 to 40 times for 2 hours, or for 68 to 80 hours. Couples do not need to complete the entire program; they may simply choose sessions of interest. Sessions are organized such that there is first a one-hour lecture on a given topic, and then participants break into small groups for an hour for further exploration on the topic.

As aforementioned, topics include God’s plan for marriage, financial management, parenting, building a marriage team, spiritual intimacy, conflict resolution, and sexual intimacy (Winn & Winn, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b). Each session is strongly grounded in scripture, which is cited to support all proposed suggestions. Thus, despite the fact that some of the topics need not be discussed in relation to spirituality, all of them are discussed in this manner. For example, in discussing the importance of setting boundaries to attain effective conflict resolution, Winn made reference to the fact that God has established boundaries; this is apparent in the definition of God in the Bible as a distinct and separate being who tells what He thinks, feels, plans, allows, likes, and dislikes. References are also made to Adam and Eve and their “ownership responsibilities,” Galatians’ definition of “burden” and “load” mentioned previously, the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 30-37, who left the man he aided in good hands so that he could move on to his own work (thus living by his boundary), and the law of sowing and reaping in Proverbs 2:26, which when interpreted by the Winn’s, means that “our actions ought to define a boundary for us in terms of what we expect to reap.” Even in discussing topics such as financial management, a topic for which many people may not be able to find a spiritual connection, scriptural references are recurrent. Winn cites from Deuteronomy 8:18 and Proverbs 10:22, which convey God as the source of our wealth, 1 Timothy 6:10 and Proverbs 1:32, which point to the potential for money to destroy, and Luke 6:38 and Malachi 3:8-10, which embrace the notion of giving in order to receive.

### **Comparison: Empirically Based vs. Spiritually Based Program Content**

The core focus of all four programs was upon conflict management and communication skills. And even some of the techniques proposed by founders and leaders in achieving such goals were quite similar. For example, with the exception of praying together, there was a striking similarity between PREP’s problem-solution format (in which couples were to engage

in “problem discussion” followed by a brainstorming of solutions, agreement and compromise, and follow-up) and the Couples’ Temperament Workshop format (in which a couple was to express feelings about unmet needs, find ways to meet each other’s needs without judgment or evaluation, find an option upon which both members of the couple agree, implement and follow-up).

### **Outcomes: Empirically Based Programs**

The most significant outcome for PREP seems to be enhanced communication of couples. Sullivan and Goldschmidt (2000) reported couples in their study found the communication segment of PREP to be the most useful one. Behrens and Halford (1994) found that the communication of couples coming from divorced homes could be brought up to the level of those not having this risk factor. Blumberg (1991) found PREP couples, as compared to Engaged Encounter couples, communicated more positively and less negatively. Thurmaier, Engl, Eckert and Hahlweg (1993) found that a version of PREP used by the Catholic Church in Germany resulted in couples with significant gains in communication and conflict management skills, which were maintained at one and three year follow-ups, as compared to a mixed control group. Ironically, this offers support for an empirically based program in a spiritual/religious setting.

In addition to enhanced communication, couples were more stable and received other benefits. Markman, Floyd, Stanley and Storaasli (1988), Markman et al. (1993), and Stanley et al. (1995) reveal that PREP couples have been shown to have about half the likelihood of breaking up or divorcing, have demonstrated greater relationship satisfaction, and have shown lower problem intensity than control couples for up to five years following training. They have also displayed better communication, less withdrawal, less denial, less dominance, less negative affect, and less overall negative communication than controls (Renick et al., 1992; Stanley et al., 1999).

In terms of communication enhancement, CC aids couples similarly well to other marriage enrichment programs. According to a couple of studies (Busick, 1982; Russell, Bagarozzi, Atilanao, & Morris, 1984), CC training has consistent, positive, and significant effects on communication behavior within relationships, when compared to relationships of couples who do not participate in the program. However, when compared to other programs, CC has similar results to other marital enrichment programs (Butler & Wampler, 1999). Many studies (Miller, 1971; Nunnally, 1972; Sarnoff, 1988; Trost, 1985) have also noted consistent, moderate positive effects on couple perceptions of the quality of their communication and on the overall quality of their relationship.

Regarding highly distressed couples, research has shown that the CC is capable of helping them turn their relationships around (Aldridge & Aldridge, 1983; Sarnoff, 1988), increases the problem-solving communication between partners (Glander, 1985; Trost, 1985), and allows the couple to work out problems in a constructive way so that both partners feel satisfied with the solutions reached (Larson & Holman, 1994; Smith, 1989).

Finally, CC seems to have some other benefits. It has been shown that self-esteem improves as a result of skills learned in CC (Busick, 1982; Coleman, 1979; Dillon, 1976), and self-disclosure increases between partners, which often demonstrates healthier self-esteem (Fleming, 1977). Furthermore, CC has shown to work well for couples of different ages (Schaffer, 1981) and for couples from varying socioeconomic groups (Burnham, 1984). Most importantly, CC has been shown to have a positive impact upon the relationship several months after the program has been completed (Busick, 1982; Sarnoff, 1988). However, the meta-analysis of Butler and Wampler (1999) questions these studies, showing communication gains deteriorated substantially by follow-up.

## **Outcomes: Spiritually Based Programs**

No research has been done on either of the spiritually based programs so outcome information is not available. Couples in the Couples' Temperament Workshop were asked to complete an evaluation at the end of the workshop, however. The evaluation asks them to rate the extent to which the process has helped them to get to know themselves and their partners better and the extent to which the workshop enriched their spiritual relationship. Such information was not made available to the author. No formal evaluations were distributed at the Heirs Together program. Out of respect for the program leaders, I did not attempt to get IRB approval for assessment data from the participants. I feared that asking for assessments from participants may make the program leaders wary of my intentions and may concern participants themselves so as a starting point in exploring spiritually based programs, I simply obtained approval to observe the programs themselves in order to compare them with empirically based programs as a case study. The program leaders did share their positive impressions with me, claiming satisfaction of participants in their programs, however, clearly this could be biased information; therefore, again, empirical testing is needed.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The empirically based marital enrichment programs discussed (PREP and CC) and the spiritually based programs noted (Couples' Temperament Workshop and Heirs Together) share similarities and differences in foundation, goals, and program content. As aforementioned, the founders and leaders share broad similarities in terms of background, with psychology and pastoral studies a commonality among some founders and leaders in each of the programs. Research by Simmons and Doherty (1998) reveal similar practices and outcomes among marital therapists with differing academic training (psychology, social work, counseling, marriage and family therapy). This also appeared to be the case for these four programs. Although there are some differences in training, the programs appear to have some similarities in terms of foundations, goals, and content, which follow.

In terms of their foundations, PREP and CC seemed to be most strongly bound in theory and research surrounding communication and conflict management, with CC also strongly tied to Systems Theory. The Couples' Temperament Workshop follows a similar line of thinking as it is grounded in the authors' understanding of temperament, which claims that individuals have different temperament needs, which when unmet, are often the cause of both interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts. All four programs in fact, seem to be centered strongly upon communication and conflict management skills as crucial issues in marital enrichment. However, spirituality and/or religion is an added component of the spiritually based programs. Rothbaum et al.'s (1982) Theory of Secondary Control, in which religion is used as a way to cope with distressing situations such as conflicts, was also found to be useful in exploring how the Couples' Temperament Workshop and Heirs Together work.

The program foundations parallel their goals and program content since the goals and content of both the empirically based and the spiritually based programs focused largely upon communication and conflict management. Communication techniques and problem solving skills are taught explicitly in all four programs. Self-actualization is also a focus.

Understanding the four programs' foundations, goals, and content is important, however, understanding the programs' outcomes is essential. The programs are meant to aid couples in enriching their marriages, and without outcome information, one cannot truly know whether or not this happens. The two empirically based programs, PREP and CC, have been validated as effective programs in terms of communication and conflict management skills. PREP has also proven to have long-term effects (up to five years), and although CC has not

been successful in producing long-term effects, it has shown to enhance the self-esteem of individuals within couples. Thus the programs have great potential in aiding couples, but they are not perfect.

Unfortunately, no research has been done on the spiritually based programs examined in this paper. In fact, very little research even exists upon spiritually based marital enrichment programs. Utilizing a pretest, posttest, wait-list design to compare 77 heterosexual couples in two experimental groups and one control group, Trathen (1995) did assess the effectiveness of a Christian version of PREP (skills based program) versus another Christian based program (information-based). Interestingly, this research revealed no significant differences between intervention groups on relationship quality or communication; couples from both groups reported increases in relationship confidence and dedication relative to controls. This indicates that the existing spiritually based programs may be as effective as the marital enrichment programs grounded explicitly in theory and research, but we cannot say for sure.

Obviously the lack of studies on spiritually based marital enrichment programs represents a gap in the literature, which if filled, will bring to light new and useful information. Through the programs examined in this paper, it is apparent that empirically based and spiritually based programs have similarities in foundations, goals and content, with the same focus upon the core curriculum (i.e., focus on conflict management and communication). All four programs aim to enrich couples' marriages by teaching them how to most effectively communicate and manage conflict. Considering the similarities in behavioral recommendations to couples and that the recommendations are supported in a secular context, one can surmise that they may work in a spiritual context as well, but research is needed to confirm since the role of context remains unclear. This is a clear indication of the possibility that spiritually based programs are likely to be *as effective* as empirically based programs. And it seems that spirituality or religion has the potential to add another powerful dimension to the existing empirically based programs. However, we cannot know anything for sure without empirical testing of the programs. Although direct comparisons may be difficult to make, empirical testing may allow for exploration of any potential sources of strength of spiritually based programs as discussed below.

There are several lines of research which support the claim that spiritually based programs may be a positive addition to existing empirically based programs. Research by Hunt and King (1978) and Stanley (1986) reveals the connection between religion and lower divorce rates, less extramarital sex, fewer conflicts, and a higher level of satisfaction. Furthermore, a there is a body of literature that supports the importance of religion in helping people cope with stress (e.g., Baumeister, 1991; Pargament et al., 1990; Whisman & Kwon, 1993). Not only does research show that religion may aid couples in terms of commitment, satisfaction, and conflict/stress management, it also reveals a connection to enhanced self-actualization (Jones, 1993) and self-esteem (Krause & Van Tran, 1989). Self-actualization was pursued on some level in all four programs; thus it is obviously viewed as beneficial in terms of marital enrichment. Furthermore, in the context of religion or spirituality, it is possible that self-actualization enhancement may be more powerful due to the underlying motivation as a result of one's faith. This is clarified with the use of persuasion theories such as Chaiken, Liberman, and Eagly's (1989) Heuristic Systematic Model (HSM) and Sherif and Hovland's (1961) Social Judgment Theory.

In addition to research connecting religion and/or spirituality to beneficial marital outcomes, persuasion theories like the Heuristic Systematic Model (HSM) can be used to explain the added power of religion and/or spirituality in enriching marriages. The HSM claims that ability and motivation contribute to one's use of systematic processing, which in turn leads to a greater likelihood of attitude change in the face of persuasive messages (i.e., behavioral recommendations of marital enrichment programs). Because participants are asked to carry

out very similar behavioral recommendations across all programs (i.e., in terms of conflict management and communication), one may surmise consistent levels of ability across groups of participants in empirically based and spiritually based marital enrichment programs. However, considering the role of religion/spirituality in behavior modification (Elisha, Idisis, & Ronel, 2012; Kelly & Greene, 2014; Lee, Veta, Johnson, & Pagano, 2014), most participants in spiritually based programs should have higher levels of motivation. Participants in both programs should be motivated by the desire to improve their marriages, but those in spiritually based programs may be further motivated by the desire to adhere to their spiritual and/or religious teachings. In short, at least in cases in which ability is the same and motivation is higher due to the influence of religion/spirituality, according to HSM, such participants would also more likely to accept and attempt to carry out the behavioral recommendations given to them in the spiritually based programs. Clearly, research would be needed to test these assertions.

Social Judgment Theory is another persuasion theory, which may be used to explain the potential for added power of religion or spirituality. Social Judgement Theory claims that persuasion is enhanced by pro-attitudinal messages for highly ego-involved individuals (those who consider particular attitudes personally relevant and important; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). In the spiritually based marital enrichment programs, this means that participants who are religious and/or spiritual will likely support advice given to them in such a context because it will contain pro-attitudinal messages consistent with their own beliefs. Again, research is needed to examine these views.

Furthermore, due to the strength of religion/spirituality in influencing decision-making processes of religious/spiritual people (Fernando & Jackson, 2006; Kelly, 2012; Sigalow, Shain, & Bergey, 2012), participants of spiritually based programs may be likely to see God as a more credible source than research. Factor analysis research reveals that the primary dimensions of credibility are expertise (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; Hovland, Janis, & Kelly, 1953; McCroskey, 1966) and trustworthiness (Applbaum & Anatol, 1972; Berlo et al., 1969; Hovland et al., 1953; McCroskey, 1966). It is possible that God is more credible along these dimensions to religious or spiritual people. Therefore, such participants would find marital enhancement suggestions given in such a spiritual framework personally relevant, important, and credible. Of course, this certainly implies an audience effect. One has to make the assumption that the participants are grounded in their religious and/or spiritual beliefs to accept the notion that they are more motivated toward behavioral change due to a spiritually based program.

Especially considering the power and influence of spirituality or religion upon decision-making and motivation of some, it is possible that religion or spirituality has the potential to add another powerful dimension to empirically based marital enrichment programs. There are small glimpses of spiritual components in some empirically based programs; in PREP for example, there are optional sessions surrounding issues of spirituality. And there is a version of PREP, called Christian PREP, in which scriptural passages are cited in support of some of the key concepts in PREP such as the speaker-listener technique and hidden issues (Christian PREP on Power Point, 1997). This is certainly a start, but neither contains the deep spiritual grounding of the spiritually based programs examined in this paper. Thus, the examination of spiritually based marital enrichment programs is important to gain an understanding of their true power and influence.

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